

acknowledgements

This study is a slightly modified version of a dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Otago. The field work formed part of the Thai Fine Arts Department's Northeast Thailand Archaeological Project. The Ban Na Di excavations were carried out under the co-directorship of Amphan Kijngam, who was at that time the director of the Northeast Thailand project, and Professor Charles Higham of the University of Otago. The director of research, Archaeology Division of the Fine Arts Department, at this time, was Pisit Charoenwongsa, and he played an important role in the planning and supervision of the research, which began at Ban Chiang and was carried on at other Northeastern sites such as Non Chai. The Ban Na Di expedition was supported by the Thai Fine Arts Department and the University of Otago. Funding was provided by the Ford Foundation, and the University of Otago.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The artist’s representation is .. a long way removed from truth, and he is able to reproduce everything because he never penetrates beneath the superficial appearance of anything.”

Plato: The Republic:598.

It is less than two decades since Higham (1972) described Thailand as an archaeological “*terra incognita*”. Preliminary reports of major excavations at Non Nok Tha (Bayard 1971), and Ban Chiang (Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976), supported by evidence from a series of smaller investigations, however, suggested that, rather than a cultural backwater (Coedes 1966), Southeast Asia, and Northeast Thailand in particular, was a cradle of very early bronze (Solheim 1968, Gorman 1978), and iron working (Bayard 1979). These metals were thought to have been exploited during the 4th millenium and by 1500 B.C. respectively (Bayard 1970, Solheim 1968, Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976). Clearly, the discovery of bronze working which ran counter to notions of a European invention (Renfrew 1973), or the presence of iron at a time it was generally considered a Hittite monopoly (Allchin and Allchin 1968:207), needed careful explanation. Unfortunately, however, detailed reports clearly setting out the provenance and confirming the stratigraphical integrity of such very early finds were lacking.

Faced with an absence of information necessary for detailed assessments of these startling possibilities, Higham and Kijngam decided to undertake a survey of sites (Kijngam *et al.* 1980), in a settlement pattern which included Ban Chiang, and to excavate one or more of these to gain insight into the prehistory of the region (Higham and Kijngam 1984). Thus the strategy was devised in order to resolve a hiatus in detailed knowledge. This gap extended to settlement size and distribution, social organisation and the cultural role of metallurgy. Information of this nature is a prerequisite if theoretical models designed to illuminate past cultural processes are to be formulated. An extensive corpus of pottery found in association with the metals similarly lacked sufficient study. The writer was kindly invited by Higham and Kijngam to study these wares.

From the outset, pottery has played a central role in most archaeological investigations in Northeast Thailand. Prehistoric wares form the cornerstone of chronological frameworks. Cultures have been characterised by pottery styles, and changes in style have often been directly correlated with culture change. These assumptions have often been questioned by workers elsewhere, because exotic styles can be imitated by indigenous potters, thus merely fashions,